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Building Authentic Trust Relationships by Networking Up Close and Personal

In the ever-increasing world of technology, in-person networking and marketing are essential to create genuine trust relationships and help you to grow your business.

By Carol Schiro Greenwald

Technology allows us to network with people anywhere in the world. At the push of a button, we can share information with everyone we know and many we want to know. But do we really know someone we only connect with through technology? More importantly, does the other person perceive our online connection as an authentic bond with the “real me”?

Professionals who have grown up with technology tend to think online connections are equivalent to in-person connections. Even though they know detectives masquerade as children in order to trap predators, they also believe that all their connections are who they say they are. They accept posts, texts and pictures as authentic and personal. But are they?

According to PR Newswire, 7 in 10 consumers say the online messages they receive do not feel personal. A HubSpot blog post from June 25, 2019, says almost everyone agrees that face-to-face meetings are essential for developing long-term relationships. This article explains why networking and marketing in person are crucial and how to improve your own interpersonal skills.

OUR ANTIQUE BRAINS NEED PERSONAL PROOF

The tested process of converting acquaintances into trusted colleagues and friends requires in-person verification. We feel the need to “press the flesh” to test the authenticity of online connections. The reason is that our brains are anachronisms, still reliving the lessons of the Stone Age when the way to assess something new was by touching it. Biological rules set by early humans still control many of our actions and reactions. In fact, when strangers seek to connect with experienced networkers, most request some in-person contact before welcoming newcomers into their networks.

Think about the Neanderthal man. The first humans were puny animals beset by larger, stronger ones. We could not run as fast as a cheetah, climb as

high as a leopard or equal the strength of an elephant. We learned to prevail by cooperating. To foster cooperation, early humans relied on body language to create trust-based group relationships.

Imagine you are a Neanderthal man in a forest thousands of years ago. No cellphone, Google or computer. No language—written or spoken. You walk in a group along a path guided by body language, such as the way the leader's feet point to indicate direction and grunts to signal what is happening up ahead.

Suddenly a stranger appears on the horizon. Fear moves quickly through the group. Then, the stranger raises his hands, palms facing outward. When he is within a few feet of the leader, he offers to shake hands. Watching this interaction, the group members feel safe once again.

Today, we still move in groups. People continue to use similar hand signals to show that we come in peace and friendship. Our old-fashioned brains still look for physical corroboration of our environment. We want the handshake as a way to test a stranger's authenticity. Our unconscious needs control important aspects of our interpersonal relationships. Understanding these forms of communication and how to use them to our advantage offer keys to our success. This is especially true when we network.

NETWORKING IS PERSONAL

Networking is about connecting with other people to develop meaningful relationships, which, in turn, help you reach economic, social and emotional goals. When planned strategically, networking becomes a way to identify and target specific venues and activities that lead to relationships with people who can help you attain your goals.

In strategic networking, you define specific goals and then design a cumulative networking approach that will move you toward those goals. Most people think first about where to network. They identify specific group activities, in-person events and online sites that seem useful. However, thinking about *how* to network is more important than considering *where*. How does our body language help us engage memorably with other people? Are we cognizant of our image in networking environments? How do we communicate with others when we network?

The image we project through our body language and the tone of our conversation contributes more than words to our success in creating the trusted, valued and positive connections we seek. Those connections form the basis for networking achievements. By learning to employ intangibles in a

positive way, you will enhance your image, showcase your brand and develop the confidence to successfully navigate any networking situation.

YOU ARE YOUR OWN BRAND

Your personal brand is a perception of who you are, built through the thousands of daily interactions with family, friends, colleagues, prospects and clients. It is the reputation that proceeds you. It is your promise to your various audiences that you will act in a certain way.

Body language is a powerful component of image, and image is a powerful component of branding. Through body language—how you move, stand and engage others—you telegraph unconscious messages that influence others' perceptions of you. Body language therefore connects you to people on an unconscious, emotional level by tying into *why* you do what you do. Body language is essential to how you see yourself and how others see you.

COMMUNICATION IS PRIMARILY VISUAL

Image is important because communication is primarily visual. Ninety-three percent of our communication is nonverbal: 55 percent is visual, based on our physiology—our gestures, posture and expressions—and 38 percent comes across through the tonality of our speech. Only 7 percent is based on what we actually say.

The emphasis on what we see also reflects the fact that, in evolutionary terms, speech is a relatively recent human phenomenon. In the beginning, we used sounds, gestures and body language to communicate. Still today, language primarily conveys information while movement and tonality express emotion.

The importance of our visual image during communication is highlighted by the human tendency to make snap judgments about other people. We form those first impressions in three to seven seconds and infer someone's future behavior from the initial interaction. If you offer a weak handshake, then we think you are weak. If you are sloppily dressed, we wonder about your professionalism. If you are unresponsive or late in following up with us, we assume you will act the same way if we hire you.

Reversing a first impression is very difficult and time-consuming, because, in what is called the "halo effect," everything else we learn about a person is used to corroborate that first impression.

BODY LANGUAGE INFLUENCES BEHAVIOR—'OURS' AND 'THEIRS'

The Oxford English Dictionary defines body language as "the conscious and unconscious movements and postures by which attitudes and feelings are

communicated.” We reveal our feelings and thoughts through our posture, gestures, expressions and proximity to others.

Understanding body language contributes to our own self-awareness and self-control, and also makes us more attuned to the emotional underlay of other people’s spoken words. We can better interpret how people feel and what they really mean by reading their body language.

- When we say people are *perceptive*, we mean they are good at spotting contradictions between words and body language.
- When we say we have a *gut feeling*, it refers to a point of view based on our instincts or emotional reaction.

Body language provides continuous unconscious signals that may or may not match our spoken words. When the unconscious reinforces the conscious, we feel like that person is being genuine. When there is a disconnect, we tend to view that person as insincere, manipulative or perhaps even a liar.

For example, people can learn to control many aspects of body language only to be betrayed by micro-expressions. These are involuntary facial expressions that flit by in 1/25th of a second. When we spot incongruence between micro-expressions (a mouth twitch, an eyebrow raised, pupils contracted) and the rest of someone’s body language, we unconsciously feel uncomfortable. We sometimes say, “People lie, bodies don’t” because we cannot control these indicators of our truest feelings.

Interpreting body language correctly is often difficult. A single gesture or body position is usually not an accurate clue to the emotions in play. Someone with crossed arms could be feeling cold or feeling threatened. Someone rubbing his or her eyes could be upset or could simply have itchy eyes. Someone displaying a fake smile could be signaling discomfort or dislike.

To feel confident in your body language assessment, you want to look for several gestures that taken together signal a set of emotions. You also want to factor in the context of the communication, such as gender, age, location, purpose, etc. If you see two people talking in the office and one is leaning back with his chin down a bit and his fingers across his mouth, you can probably infer correctly that he is feeling defensive or hostile. If you see two people standing casually with open relaxed arms, legs apart and wide smiles on their faces, they are probably enjoying each other’s conversation.

IMPROVE YOUR POSTURE

When networking, one of the most important aspects of body language is posture, because posture creates presence. To impart a sense of control and

evoke a feeling of confidence in those around you, stand “tall” with your spine straight, your feet slightly apart and grounded, and your hands comfortably at your side. Similarly, when seated, project professionalism and interest by sitting upright, perhaps tilting your body or head slightly toward the person speaking. When you walk into a room, have a confident stride, upright posture and a smile on your face.

Many leadership attributes are signaled by similar body language. A put-together, professional appearance suggests confidence and presence. Standing tall or sitting upright implies authority and composure. Walking with purpose evokes strength, intention and drive. Widening your eyes during conversations indicates interest and inspires trust. Genuine smiles signify happiness, competence and a sense of security. Eye contact during conversations makes a person more believable and regulates conversations.

The same combination of attributes in the networking context suggests a feeling of comfort and assurance.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMFORT

Feeling comfortable with where you are and who you are is key to successful networking. Many networking books suggest that you put yourself in situations where you fear you may feel uncomfortable, and over time you will get better with practice. The problem with this advice is that your body language may highlight your discomfort, which makes it difficult to project a successful, confident image.

Instead of forcing yourself to engage in marketing that isn’t a good fit, find networking environments that are more comfortable for you. If you don’t like large crowds, participate in small groups that meet on a regular basis. If you don’t drink and you are uncomfortable at cocktail parties, don’t go. Instead meet people for breakfast or lunch. If you worry about being all alone at a conference, use your contacts list to find someone else who will be attending the same event and make plans to meet there. It’s better to market in a way that feels authentic than to perform poorly in an uncomfortable situation.

MIRRORING SIGNIFIES FRIENDSHIP

When networking your way through a conference or cocktail party, notice that in compatible groupings, the individuals typically mirror each other’s stance. Mirroring refers to the natural process of matching the behavior of others by adopting their mannerisms, such as their speech cadence, gestures and posture.

We use mirroring to create compatibility and comfort in a group. It makes it easier for people to relate to each other because we seem more like each

other. Mirroring behaviors signal that we like or agree with the other person. In networking, mirroring fosters mutual rapport. Noticing this body language convergence when you are networking offers clues as to whether you are making a positive impression or whether you want to join someone else's conversation.

There are two other important body language clues when navigating toward friendly networking groupings. The first clue is the distance between individuals, known technically as "proxemics" or the culturally determined spatial arrangements between individuals. If people are close together and leaning toward each other, it suggests they are all engaged in the conversation.

But to be sure, consider clue two: the direction of people's feet. Our feet and legs are the most honest parts of our body. Again, think back to walking in the forest eons ago—our ancestors would worry about hidden dangers and focus on following the direction of the leader's feet. Since those prehistoric times, the direction of one's feet has signaled where the person wants to go. For example:

- We tend to point our lead foot in the direction our mind wants to go, whether it be toward the most attractive person in the room or the nearest exit.
- When we jiggle our feet, it signals impatience or an inclination to run away.
- Before joining a conversation, check out the feet, as Carol Kinsey Gorman says in *The Nonverbal Advantage: Secrets and Science of Body Language at Work*: "If the feet of your two colleagues stay in place, and they twist only their upper torsos in your direction, they don't really want you to join the conversation. If they are willing to include you, the foot nearest you will turn slightly in your direction."

THE IMPORTANCE OF COURTESY

Courtesy is conveyed through good manners and body language. When you are introduced, take a small step forward, hold out your hand, look in the person's eyes, smile, shake hands firmly and say your name clearly. This immediately conveys approachability, authority and attention. Reinforce the sense of being present by turning off your cellphone. Leaving a cellphone on and visible during conversations contradicts attentiveness.

Everyone wants to feel important or at least relevant. One way to foster this feeling in a conversation is to focus on the person you are speaking with. This is the secret to many a politician's charm. For the 15 seconds you are in front of them, they concentrate on you. By contrast, people who converse

with one eye out for the next opportunity signal insincerity and disinterest. Focusing on another person can often include more than just paying attention too. For example, when someone hands you their business card, don't just pocket it. Reinforce the message of your handshake and the focus of your attention by reading and commenting on the card.

WHEN IT'S TIME TO TALK

Conversation, like body language, is an indirect indicator of the kind of person you are. Do you ask open-ended questions that help you learn more about the other person? Do you put giving before getting and look for ways to help the other person? Do you use conversation to complete the picture of the person before you? Your content, tone and tics, clarity, and energy will have a large effect on the success of the conversation and on how others view you.

Content: There are two types of networking conversations: small talk and agenda driven. Small talk is innocuous in that it is usually driven by easy-to-answer questions about someone's experience or interests. However, small talk also has the potential to segue into a deeper conversation that tells you more about the other person's motivation and values. For example, many conversations include an innocuous question like: "Did you go away this summer?" But think about how to follow up in a way that drives conversation: "What was the most unusual or unexpected happening on the trip?" Or, "What are the next travel destinations on your wish list?"

Interesting questions prevent a conversation from degenerating into verbal pingpong. Small talk should not be confused with icebreakers. Icebreakers are those questions or comments about the weather, the meeting location or the speaker that start the conversation.

Agenda-driven conversation is an important part of any networking plan. It should be prepared ahead of time, before you arrive at the networking activity. You will want to think about news, ideas or successes that showcase what you are doing, as well as questions related to information you want to acquire. In these conversations, you are looking for commonalities in terms of interests, activities, aspirations, and ways to help and be helped.

For example, if you are a trust and estates lawyer, you might talk about the way a judge handled a situation you brought to family court. Or, you might discuss an interesting approach you tried in working out an intergenerational trust. If you are an intellectual property lawyer focused on copyright and trademarks, you might talk about trends in consumer product branding. Or, you might discuss a recent trademark case now pending in the Second Circuit.

Whatever the discussion, remember you are creating a brand-worthy image or destroying one through the caliber of your content. Interesting topics, thoughtful questions and knowledgeable replies reinforce your claim to be a first-rate professional. Poorly considered answers can weaken the image you are trying to project. Don't ramble. Make your important points first and choose affirmative words to reinforce your positive body language.

Also, avoid jargon. Jargon words are insiders' shortcuts that can feel exclusionary or patronizing to outsiders. When people don't understand you, it can cut into the rapport you are trying to establish.

Tone and Tics: Remember that within communication, words alone account for 7 percent of an exchange, but the way in which the words are spoken accounts for 38 percent. Tone is too important to leave to chance. Practice paragraphs you use often like your elevator speech, value proposition and benefits statement. Don't let verbal tics, such as "uhm" or "like," muddy your sentences.

Speak clearly and with energy. Use a modulated tone, not whiny, singsong or loud. Use the energy level of your voice to help your listeners follow your thoughts and pay attention. A bit of silence at the end of sentences allows them to catch up with you.

Overall, understanding why visual perceptions are so important, and understanding how they influence behavior, can impact the impression you make and lead to more effective communication and networking for each individual.

SIDEBAR

Six Steps to a Perfect Networking Handshake

1. The handshake initiator takes a small step forward.
2. Offers his/her hand with the palm perpendicular to the floor and facing outward.
3. Looks the other person in the eyes, and smiles.
4. Shakes two or three times, matching the strength of the other person's handshake.
5. Says, "Hello. My name is _____." Or, "Hello. I am glad to meet you." Be sure to say your name clearly. We know our name so well we often

mumble it.

6. For the last step, the initiator drops her/his hand and steps back that first small step.

SIDEBAR

Power of Seven

SEVEN SECONDS to make a first impression
SEVEN INITIATIVES to overcome a bad one
SEVEN CONTACTS before someone remembers you
SEVEN CONTACTS A YEAR to stay top of mind

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